

THIS ARTICLE IS A SUMMARY OF A REPORT COMMISSIONED BY GENDER AND DISASTER AUSTRALIA.

The socio-economics of gender and disasters



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Disasters do not discriminate, but our society does, leading the effects of disasters to reverberate unequally, magnifying existing vulnerabilities and disparities. The report explores the issue of gender, disasters and socio-economics, providing insight into the intersectionality of gender and economics within the Australian context.

The socio-economics of disasters

Disasters are not experienced uniformly across society. Rather, the underlying socioeconomic conditions, norms, disadvantages and inequalities that existed prior to disasters are major factors in an individual's pre-existing level of financial and economic security. Unequal distribution of power and positions of influence along gendered lines can also erode the subsequent degree of agency and influence that individuals have over decisions that influence their lives and livelihoods. Protective factors that enhance an individual's economic resilience include a secure income, access to savings or credit, employment with social protection, marketable job skills, education and training, and control over productive resources.¹ These factors not only help individuals prepare for disasters, but also influence their subsequent ability and time it takes to absorb, cope, respond and recover from disaster shocks.

The next section describes some broad trends and conditions for women, men and gender diverse peoples. It highlights the systemic factors that have contributed to gender-based discrimination and inequality over time. While this is true at a cohort level, it is important to note that this does not necessarily always reflect the experiences of individuals within each cohort, nor fully capture the intersectionality of gender with age and other attributes and dimensions of identity, such

as Indigenous identity, disability, cultural and migrant background, household circumstances and socioeconomic background – all of which may add or detract from their individual economic resilience within and across the gender spectrum.

Gendered experiences

Women

Consistent with international experience, being a woman is associated with lower levels of economic resilience to disasters in Australia, particularly in comparison to men. This is due to a variety of interconnected factors, including gender inequality, socio-economic and power disparity, and access and control over resources.

While there have been significant increases in women's labour force participation and earnings over the last few decades, the gender-patterned nature of the workforce's industry of employment has a direct bearing on women's earning potential. Historically, male-dominated industries sit in the upper half of the average earning spectrum, while the average earnings in many industries that are large employers of women are in the lower half of the earnings spectrum.² The historic undervaluation and gendered associations with the care economy, in which women are over-represented, also add to gender differentials in workforce outcomes.³

1. Shi H and Jin E (2022, December) 'Valuing the costs of natural disasters using the life satisfaction approach. Victoria's Economic Bulletin, 6(4).
2. KPMG (2022) She's Price(d)less: The economics of the gender gap, <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/au/pdf/2022/kpmg-shes-priced-less-2022.pdf>
3. The Senate, Finance and Public Administration References Committee (2017) 'Gender Segregation in the Workplace and Its Impact on Women's Economic Equality,' Parliament House, June 2017, accessed April 2023, www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/senate/finance_and_public_administration/gendersegregation/Report.

Women are also more likely than men to work in part-time positions, accounting for 68.5% of the part-time workforce in 2022.⁴ Women's choices to participate in the labour force, and the extent of their participation, are inherently constrained by the unequal distribution of care-giving within society.⁵

Women also overwhelmingly head one parent families with children and dependants, with the ABS Census 2021 reporting 79.8% of single parents being female.⁶

Females are also more likely to be carers for people with disability. For example, the ABS 2018 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia survey found that while prevalence of disability was similar for women (17.8%) and men (17.6%), 7 in 10 (71.8%) primary carers were women.

Cumulatively, these factors reduce women's capacity to prepare for, and manage the financial impacts of a disaster. With less access and control over economic resources, women face hindrances to recovery and longer-term resilience.

Men

Men as a group broadly have relatively greater financial security and more power in decision making which support economic resilience to disasters. However, they also represent a greater proportion of people experiencing homelessness (56%) and more likely to be living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out compared to females of all ages.⁷

They can also be vulnerable in disasters due to gender social norms and expectations. Hyper-masculinity norms can reinforce their role as 'provider and protector', heightening their exposure to hazards in work and disaster contexts, and normalising risky behaviour.^{8,9} Hyper-masculine norms can also lead to self-destructive coping strategies (including interpersonal violence and substance abuse) during disasters and create barriers to asking for help, which inhibit recovery from trauma. These have important implications on their ongoing ability to participate and engage in the workforce. Cumulatively, this affects the longevity and quality of their life and wellbeing.

Gender diverse peoples

Historical discrimination and disadvantages experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities have created ongoing barriers to housing, participation in educational and economic opportunities and willingness to access official essential services and supports.¹⁰

While official data is limited,¹¹ a recent study involving almost 7,000 LGBTIQ+ people living in Australia (6,835) found relatively higher rates of poverty and homelessness compared to the general population. Almost a third of participants (31.3%) reported an income of less than

\$400, which is below the Australian poverty line for single person (\$411.38, excluding housing¹²). Homelessness was a significant experience. One in five (22%) of participants reported having ever experienced homelessness, including almost one in three trans and gender diverse people.

Such socioeconomic conditions are known to erode individual financial and economic resilience to disasters.¹³

Policy implications and considerations

Our literature review has confirmed that disasters can and do have profound and long-lasting socioeconomic impacts on communities, which can vary by gender.

However, these impacts and consequences are not inevitable. Local and national socioeconomic policy responses can support more gender-inclusive and responsive approaches to aid long-term disaster recovery and resilience, and contribute to lessening (or at least, not widening) the pre-existing gender inequities that are often disproportionately borne by those already living on the margin.

This article was commissioned by Gender and Disaster Australia and written by an anonymous organisation. The full report, including references, can be found at <https://genderanddisaster.com.au/resources>

4. Ibid.

5. Preston A and Yu S (2014) 'Is there a part-time/ full-time pay differential in Australia?', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 57(1):24–47.

6. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022, October 18) Labour Force Status of Families. ABS website www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/jun-2023.

7. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) Estimating Homelessness: Census. ABS website www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/2021.

8. Zara C, Parkinson D, Duncan A and Joyce K (2016) 'Men and disaster: Men's experiences of the Black Saturday bushfires and the aftermath', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 31(3):41–48.

9. Parkinson D (2022) 'I thought you were more of a man than that': Men and disaster', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 37(4):20–25.

10. Equality Australia (2023) *LBTIQ+ Experiences of Poverty Submission to the Senate Community Affairs and References Committee Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia*. <https://equalityaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Equality-Australia-Submission-to-the-Senate-Inquiry-into-the-Nature-and-Extent-of-Poverty-in-Australia-1.pdf>

11. Hill A, Bourne A, McNair R, Carman M and Lyons A (2020) *Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia*. ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 122. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

12. Melbourne Institute (2022, March) Poverty Lines: Australia. The University of Melbourne. https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/4222195/Poverty-Lines-Australia-March-2022.pdf

13. See discussion in Chapter 2: Indicators of: Parsons M, Reeve I, McGregor J, Morley P, Marshall G, Stayner R, McNeill J, Glavac S and Hastings P (2020) *The Australian Natural Disaster Resilience Index: Volume II – Index Design and Computation*. Melbourne, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.